Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation
Benchmark Committee

Meeting Summary
November 29, 1999

ADOPTED (12/17/99)

Committee members present: John Kelly, John Rindlaub, Commissioner Judie Stanton, Charlie Shell (representing Councilmember Richard McIver)

Committee members not present: Chair Bob Helsell, Greg Devereux, Representative Karen Schmidt

The Benchmark Committee convened at 10:00 am at the SeaTac Marriott Hotel. In the Chair's absence, Acting Chair John Rindlaub called the meeting to order. The meeting summary of October 14, 1999 was adopted. No members of the public wished to offer public comments.

Committee Workplan

Kathy Elias, Committee staff person, provided a summary of the proposed workplan. The approach to developing benchmarks would be to review available existing data sources on benchmark topic areas; invite topic specialists as needed to present information about any issues or limitations with the data; take up one or two benchmarks each month until agreements could be reached; and finally to develop and agree upon benchmark targets. The Committee's work would be presented to the full Commission at its retreat in May.

Tentative meeting dates were identified:
- December 17
- January 12
- February 18
- March 17
- April 21

Available State and National Data for Benchmarking

Charlie Howard, Planning Director for the Washington State Department of Transportation, provided a set of graphs representing available data in a number of areas:

Pavement Condition. The state collects data on pavement structural condition (PSC) for the state highway system and uses a pavement management system to achieve lowest life cycle cost. The PSC measures pavement cracking and the optimal repaving cycle is on average at 12 to 14 years. WSDOT's target is to have no pavement in poor/very poor condition. The graphic shows that in 1971 about 30% of the state's highways were in poor condition, by 1998 through consistent preservation funding, that number had declined to less than 10%. Even post-695, the Transportation Commission has made pavement and bridge preservation a high priority.

The actual condition rating is carried out by crews who go out and rate the pavement using a national rating scale. The federal Highway Performance Monitoring System (HPMS) also samples a portion of county and city arterials. Starting in the early 1990s, HPMS switched its rating from PSC (cracking) to a roughness index. The graph based on Professor David Hartgen's comparisons showing Washington state and the national mean over time for the interstate system indicate the switch from pavement structural condition to roughness in the early 1990s.

Committee members noted that citizens tend to notice pavement roughness and complain about it more than they do cracking. Roughness affects drivability and congestion when vehicles have to slow down. Charlie commented that the consultants for the JLARC audit had recommended making greater use of roughness and rutting factors. The Hartgen data which use roughness and provide a national comparison appeared more useful to committee members for benchmarking, while PSC seemed more useful as a management tool. Even though using roughness might lead to higher costs, it might also lead to higher public satisfaction and acceptability. It was suggested that Washington would want to be at least at the national mean. The question was raised whether principal arterials where most people drive are the ones more people would actually care about. It was noted that Hartgen also provides pavement condition data on principal arterials.

It was suggested that a model to emulate was the one used by education reform advocates who started testing children at just one grade level and expanded over time to add more grades. The committee may need to stick with a single set of high-level data for now and recommend a post-BRCT workplan to add data in the future.

Bridge Condition. Uniform data is collected by the State of Washington Inventory of Bridges (SWIBS) for state, county and city bridges. Two standards are used: structurally deficient (e.g., weakened footings) and functionally obsolete (e.g., narrow lanes). A scale of 0 to 100 is used to rate each condition. State and federal dollars have been focused on the structurally deficient bridges and the trends indicate bridges with a sufficiency rating of less than 50 have been significantly reduced in recent years. Again, Professor Hartgen's data show the percent of deficient bridges in Washington compared to the national mean and indicate that Washington is doing better than the mean. This indicator is a "good news" story that shows what has been accomplished.

Transit Condition. The transit fleet statewide grew from 3,112 vehicles to 3,519 (a 13% increase), however the proportion of vehicles being rated 80 or above declined slightly, indicating an older rolling stock. Committee members suggested this indicator was not very useful as the public cares much more about vehicle occupancy than condition. Staff were asked to look for other data on transit, especially related to operational performance, to bring back to the Committee.

Safety. Accident data are collected at the state, county and city levels and include fatalities, injuries and property damage. Washington accident statistics per million miles traveled are below the national mean, however this is attributable to driver behavior factors such as the incidence of drunk driving and seat belt usage, not necessarily factors related the transportation system. While statistics indicate accidents have declined significantly, public perception is that roads are less safe. Especially at the local level, pedestrian and bicycle accidents are considered very important. A Committee member observed that citizens support use of county road levy funds for traffic enforcement purposes to ensure safety. Staff were asked to look into what data might be available on pedestrian and bicycle accidents.

Another topic area mentioned as important to the safety of the system was the seismic safety of bridges. Data are collected and staff indicated they would bring back what was available to the next meeting.

Congestion. In 1999, about 11% (794 miles) of the state highway system was congested. By 2020, it was projected that 37% (2,600 miles) would be congested. The graph showing Hartgen's comparison of Washington to the national mean shows that between 60% and 80% of the state's urban interstate system is congested, considerably higher than the national mean. It was observed that the urban interstate is important, but not equally important to everyone. It might be more helpful to show some regional variation or the number of miles affected by congestion. It was also noted that the national comparison is useful because it shows Washington's problem and serves as a call to action.

Multi-Modal Options. The first graph indicates the change in non-SOV trips at major employer sites subject to the Commute Trip Reduction law (employers with more than 100 employees in 9 counties). Since 1993 the trend shows a slight increase from about 25% to about 30% of alternative mode share. Committee members felt the data were too confusing and did not reflect what was important to the public, namely that options be available.

More useful data might be HOV occupancy or transit mode split in major urban areas of the state. Members also wondered whether there might be data on peer states or peer metro areas around the country, for example to compare the number of riders per capita or indicators that modal investments are balanced. Staff were asked to research available data.

Air Quality. The two graphs in the handout show that the two major vehicle-related pollutants, ozone and carbon monoxide, have both declined to almost no incidences since the early 1990s. Members felt this would not be a useful benchmark but might be used as part of the "good news" story as an indicator related to the transportation system.

Charlie Howard concluded his presentation. Members felt that on a number of the indicators that had been presented, a benchmark might have been identified. On other topics, additional information was needed. Staff agreed to bring back more research on the following topics:

- Pedestrian and bicycle accident data
- Seismic safety of bridges
- Transit and multi-modal options

Kathy Elias added that two major topic areas on the original benchmark list were also slated to be discussed at next month's meeting: freight mobility and efficiency. In the freight area, data might be available only for container and cargo volumes at West Coast ports and market share of Washington's ports. While this is not directly an indicator about Washington's transportation system, it may be all that is readily available. A member asked whether there might be data on the cost of delay. Staff replied they would research the issue.

It was suggested that staff also bring back recommendations for some of the initial benchmarks in a format that shows what data are being used, what issues exist with the data, and what holes may need to be filled in the future.

LEAP Local Government Decision Support System

Chris Mudgett of the County Road Administration Board (CRAB) provided an overview of the project. The Legislature had authorized a statewide study of city and county infrastructure needs in the areas of transportation, sewer, water and drainage. One of the study's recommendations had been to develop a decision support system that would allow policy makers to make well-informed decisions about infrastructure investments. For a year now, a committee headed by the Legislative Evaluation and Accountability Program (LEAP) has been developing two pilot projects, one of which is on transportation. The committee is sorting out what data are available at the city and county levels and included financial data as well as pavement condition, safety and congestion.

The State Auditor's office is on the committee because the governmental accounting standards board (GASB) that control financial reporting by local jurisdictions will be implementing changes in the near future. This has major implications for any financial measures such as costs per mile or costs of certain transportation functions. The change creates an opportunity to collect new kinds of data and to provide guidance to cities and counties on how costs are recorded in the state budgeting, accounting and reporting system (BARS). After it is fully developed in several years, LEAP will have a website on which the relevant local government data (both fiscal and other) will be able to be viewed. BRCT may wish to make recommendations to the LEAP committee on changes that would make data from local governments, data from WSDOT, and national HPMS data comparable to each other and more useful for benchmarking purposes.

The Committee adjourned at 1:00 pm.